



the finer points of women's fashion by Force Unbroken

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Summary: El's Snow Ball dress had to come from somewhere. (Alternatively: El needs a dress, Hopper needs a cigarette, and Joyce needs a hug.)

the finer points of women's fashion

Well. I can't say this is how I thought I would be entering the Stranger Things fandom, but my beta demandeth and I acquiesce. Or something like that. Iirie you asked for Jopper and "not wearing that," so this is all yOUR FAULT.

Anyway guys, here, have a thing!

"Try again, Hop. She is not wearing that."

Vocabulary was never Joyce's favorite subject in school, but if she had a word for it, "deflate" would be a good way to describe the slump that creeps into Hopper's frame when she pronounces her judgment. The shirt and skirt he's got clasped in each big hand sink just a little where he displays them both in front of him, and if she weren't so busy trying to thwart his bad decisions, the sight of Chief Jim Hopper holding preteen girls' fashion up to his chest might be laughable. "What's wrong with this?"

"It looks like something she'd wear to school, not a dance."

"Technically she is going to school. It'll pull double duty, right?"

"No!"

They're standing in the middle of some low-end department store 20 miles outside of Hawkins, two weeks before the Snow Ball and not quite two months since The Gate was closed and Joyce performed her first (and please God let it be her only) exorcism. When he'd first asked her to join him for this – and if anyone had told her six months ago that she'd be debating the finer points of women's fashion with Jim Hopper, she would have laughed out loud – she'd thought he was extending the offer as a way to get her out of her own head for a while, to keep her from falling down the rabbit hole of nearly losing Will (again) and completely losing... Well. Now, however, she realizes that his plan was less selflessness and more damage control, because Hopper knows about as much about dresses as she knows about Dungeons and Dragons, and if the decision was left solely in

his hands, El would be – as the kids so eloquently put it – doomed.

"It's a school dance, Hop. That is not the same thing and you know it." Joyce folds her arms in front of her and reminds herself to be patient. She can do this. "Don't you remember prom?"

"I wore a suit and spent most of the night outside smoking. How does that help here?"

Well. So much for patience.

"Okay, never mind. Let's start over." Joyce walks over to the nearest clothing rack and gestures to the garments, (barely) resisting the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose. "El is going to the Snow Ball. She needs a dress that fits so she can blend in with the other girls. We have thirteen days to pick something. Now, what does she like?"

Hopper does *not* resist the urge to scrub a hand over his face and speaks the majority of his next sentences from behind his palm. "I dunno, Joyce, the kid grew up in a lab and I can't exactly bring her here to ask her. She spends most of her time in hand-me-downs and flannels and Nancy's old pajama pants, how the hell am I supposed to know what kind of dress she'll like?"

Joyce fidgets. "Just pick something!"

"I did!"

"Pick something else!"

"Like what?"

"I don't know!"

There is absolutely no reason for her hands to be shaking. There is no reason at all for her hands to be shaking, Joyce realizes with a kind of belated confusion that somehow does not stop the behavior in question. She can feel something tight building in her chest, and she crosses said hands and arms over said chest to ignore it. "We've been here for two hours Hop, the dance is less than two weeks away. She can't go in flannel and overalls, so we've got to just pick something and go with it!"

There is a moment where she thinks his next word is going to be something unfit for the children's section of a JCPenney's. It would be funny in any other circumstance, because his mouth has gotten him into trouble since before they were seventeen and got caught smoking under the bleachers while skipping chemistry. She *should* be struggling not to laugh. But she just hasn't found much funny lately – not since they carried Will out of the Upside Down and drove a shadow monster out of him and buried the mangled remains of someone she couldn't quite bring herself to love (and if she's being honest with herself, not much was funny in the years before that, either). Instead, she's felt like there's about six more shoes waiting to drop, and all of a sudden her brain is telling her that right now while she's standing in a department store is the perfect time for it all to happen.

Jesus, Joyce. Get it together or you're gonna lose it completely.

Some of this must read on her face, because Hopper just stops for a second. He exhales, all the frustration gone out of him. His eyes flicker over her, not cool or calculating, just...concerned. She wants to tell him to stop that, but anxiety itches beneath the surface of her skin, and she cannot for the life of her figure out why.

"Okay," he says after a long moment. She thinks he may have given up. She thinks she and El both might have to smack him if he does, because they need a dress in less than two weeks (and she can't make one appear out of thin air, dammit). Instead, he looks up at her. "Do you wanna go for a smoke?"

She lets him lead her through the clothing racks and out of the building into the parking lot. She expects them to stand on the sidewalk and light up, letting the smoke curl away in the cold evening breeze, where he'll wait all of about five minutes before he asks her why in the hell she's freaking out over things mostly made out of frilly pink fabric.

She does not expect him to walk them to the Blazer, unlock the doors, and reach for his radio once they're seated in the vehicle. But he does crack the windows and crank the engine and light up their cigarettes in the process, so hey, she wasn't entirely wrong.

She's not sure how long they sit there, but the sound of the static and the smoke in her lungs is soothing, so she focuses on the rise and fall of each drag she takes from the cigarette while he huffs and puffs and fiddles with the radio. She can feel the anxiety still attempting to claw up the back of her throat, but somehow it seems a little more manageable here, a little less wild and all-consuming. (Of course, that could be the nice little nicotine addiction she's got going on too, but she won't focus on that.) She closes her eyes and listens to Hopper settle himself in beside her and half expects him to call Flo for a status update.

"Hey, kid. You there?"

The realization that he isn't talking to Flo pulls her back to the present. Joyce sits up and scoots a little closer to Hopper, almost without realizing she's doing it. After a few seconds of silence a familiar voice drifts back over the airwaves. *"Here. Okay?"*

El's vocabulary has come a long way from where it was when Joyce first met her last year, but she still falls back on monosyllabic answers more often than not. Joyce feels her lips quirk up ever so slightly despite the tightness in her chest. They left El and Will holed up in the safety of Hopper's cabin to come here, and if she knows the girl as well as she thinks she does, they've probably broken into her stash of Eggos by now.

Hop's eyes crinkle a little at the edges at the sound of her voice. "Yeah, everything's okay. We're still shopping, just wanted to check in." His eyes drift over to Joyce; she realizes belatedly how close they are, almost pressed hip to thigh, huddled together in the relative warmth of the cab. She almost thinks about putting a little distance between them when he speaks next and the thought goes out the window. "Kid, would you do me a favor and put Will on the line? His mom wants to talk to him, all right?"

"All right," El parrots back, just a hint of sass evident in her tone. Hopper shakes his head, but his eyes are still on Joyce, and she thinks the smile on his lips is for the both of them. His hands are warm when he passes her the walkie; if he notices the sudden sheen in her eyes when her son's voice comes across the connection, he doesn't say anything.

"Hi, Mom."

And just like that, the anxiety vanishes. "Hi sweetie," she says, fingers clenched tight around the transmitter. Relief slowly seeps into her veins, because he's there, he's *fine*, and he wouldn't sound like that if it wasn't really him talking. She slumps back against the seat and feels Hopper's shoulder nudge hers ever so gently. "How's everything going there? You guys having fun?"

"Yeah, we're having a lot of fun," he says, and a little bit of his old enthusiasm bursts through the radio. *"I've been teaching El about the different classes in Dungeons and Dragons, and we're working on designing our characters now. She might even be able to play with us once we finish working on the new campaign."*

Joyce bites back a laugh as Hopper rolls his eyes, but there's no venom in it, and his lips are quirked up too. "That sounds great, sweetheart," she says – even if she doesn't quite understand half of what he's talking about, she means it. She catches Hopper's gaze and mouths *"thank you"* as she lifts the walkie to her lips. "Hop and I still have some shopping around to do, so we better get back to it. You guys stay safe and have fun, okay? We'll be back before long."

"Okay," Will says. *"I love you, Mom."*

"I love you too, sweetie," she tells him, and it's the easiest thing she's ever said.

Hopper's hand curls around the one she's got on the walkie. He lifts both towards his mouth and presses the talk button before there's no one on the other end of the line to answer. "Hey Will, put the kid back on for me would you?"

There is a brief shuffling sound, like Will's finger doesn't fully make it off the transmit button as he seeks out El to make the transfer. Joyce is suddenly aware of the gentle roughness of the palm against the back of her hand, the wash of warm breath against her knuckles. She looks up and catches Hopper's gaze, deep blue in the muted light. There is a brief moment where she wonders why things never felt this easy with Bob before El's voice crackles back over the line (and seemingly startles them both).

"You rang?"

That quip no doubt picked up from one of her many soap operas earns a silent groan and a forehead to the steering wheel from Hopper. Joyce rolls her eyes in mixed fondness and exasperation as she weaves her fingers free of his.

"You keep talkin' like that and your voice is gonna freeze that way," he drawls.

"What?"

"You know what, never mind."

Joyce inhales smoke and lets her eyes drift closed as they bicker good-naturedly in the background. Her hands don't shake where they keep a loose grip on her cigarette or press into the relative warmth of her ratty winter coat. Her chest doesn't stutter with each drag she takes from her coffin nail. The six shoes she's still waiting to see drop seem a little farther away than they did an hour ago. She knows it isn't over, knows there's still too many spaces in her chest full of guilt and grief and anxiety, but in this moment, she feels safe, and she doesn't want to think about what that means.

(She doesn't want to think about the look in his eyes or his hand over hers, because he knows her too well and he knew what she needed before she knew herself, and she has buried a man who committed the crime of loving her. She does not want him to be another casualty of her touch.)

She slowly finishes her cigarette while Hopper stays on the connection with El, asking questions about what kind of dress she'd like to have, calling her "Anne Shirley" when she requests one with puffed sleeves. (He rubs absently at an empty spot on his wrist when her small voice says *"I like blue,"* and Joyce thinks it's something for them alone to share.) She exhales her last drag as he cuts the connection, and then it's just them in the front seat of the Blazer, still a little too close (and somehow not close enough).

He tips his head toward her, the smile on his lips soft and gentle. After everything, after Bob, she thinks it's more than she deserves.

"Better?" he asks.

It is so easy to bump her shoulder to his. She smiles up at him, swallowing back the sadness, ignoring how much she wishes she could love him the way they both deserve.

"Yeah," she says. "Better."

She thinks that one day, it'll be the whole truth.

(They find the dress in fifteen minutes, cornflower blue with burgundy polka dots and puffed sleeves. Later, El cradles the dress as she hugs them both within the safety of the cabin, and with the kids surrounding her and Hopper a warm presence at her side, Joyce wonders when this began to feel so much like *home*.)

chaseyesterdays on Tumblr for more fandom nonsense.

(Also thank you for reading and reviews are the highlight of my exhausted and panic-stricken life lol)